DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 832 FL 006 627

AUTHOR Saporta, Sol
TITLE Language in a Sexist Society.
PUB DATE Dec 74
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America (New York, New York, December 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Discriminatory Attitudes (Social); *English; *Language Patterns; *Language Usage; Metaphors; Semantics; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Sociolinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage; Syntax
IDENTIFIERS Epithet; Euphemism; *Sexism

ABSTRACT

No attempt is made here to construct a theory about language and sexism, but examples of English usage are provided as data which would have to be accounted for by any general statements regarding the nature and function of sexist language in our society. The examples are taken from the English lexicon and syntactic structure, with emphasis on assymetrical constructions, metaphorical terms, euphemisms, and epithets. (PMP)

ED 098832

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

LANGUAGE IN A SEXIST SOCIETY

A linguist trying to discuss language and sexism is immediately confronted with the absence of the relevant theory. First, we know very little of the relationship between language on the one hand and attitudes, beliefs and perception on the other hand. It is hard to demonstrate either that language determines or is determined by attitudes in spite of a tradition of heated discussion and exaggerated claims. For example, no one would seriously suggest that the substitution of Black for Negro either caused or resulted from the elimination or reduction of racism. Similarly, no conclusion can be drawn about sexist attitudes merely because chairperson increasingly replaces chairman. Rather it seems that language is to sexism as symptom is to disease. Fever doesn't cause flu, and flu doesn't cause fever; flu is presumably diagnosed on the basis of a set of symptoms of which fever is one; similarly with sexism and language.

Second, we know virtually nothing about how linguistic competence, that is, what speakers know about their language, interacts with beliefs and attitudes to determine linguistic performance, that is, how speakers use their knowledge. Thus, for most people, the sentence My neighbor is a blonde. is usually interpreted as referring to a woman although there is nothing in the semantics of words for hair color to suggest that, when nominalized, they ought to refer exclusively to females. On the other hand, the fact that we talk about unwed mothers, but not normally about unwed fathers, is a linguistic observation that obviously is not unrelated to how society views parenthood and marriage. Neither language nor logic can account for the currency of one and not the other, since presumably they come in pairs.

FL006627

In any case, the following facts of English and English usage provide data which presumably have to be accounted for by any general statements regarding the nature and function of sexist language in this society.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In English grammar, the masculine form is characterized as the unmarked category and the feminine as the marked. Thus, for example, there are a number of suffixes which explicitly refer to, that is, "mark" the feminine: prince princ-ess, wait-er wait-r-ess, hero hero-ine, comedi-an comedi-enne. Notice, however, that although She is a comedian. is acceptable, He is a comedienne. is not. Similarly, the marked form is often indicated by a pattern of modification, for example, lady doctor or woman athlete, opposed normally simply to doctor or athlete, not man athlete. This often results in anomalous constructions like lady mailman or madame chairman. Observe that in spite of the apparent contradiction an expression like bachelor girl is current, whereas married bachelor is semantic nonsense. Related forms of modification are illustrated by expressions like career woman on the one hand and family man on the other.

Another use of the unmarked form is its use to cover both categories, referred to as neutralization, as in the generic use of man, mankind and numerous expressions like man-hors, man the boats, even oh man! But sometimes man is not used generically even though one might think it ought to be. A man's home is his castle. does not mean A man or woman's home is his or her castle. Man is not the only form used in this way; consider brotherhood, fellowship, masterpiece and you guys. Masculine pronouns are often used to refer to people of unknown sex, which explains the recent declaration by a self-righteous chairman that "we will hire the most qualified person regardless of his sex." Other languages have systems of grammatical gender which result in another form of neutralization. Spanish has hermano for 'brother' and hermana for 'sister' but John and Mary are brohher and sister. is rendered by Juan y María son hermanos.

Perhaps just as revealing as the general case are the exceptions. English seems to have only one suffix marking the masculine, which occurs in the pair

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

widow widower. Examples where the masculine is expressed by a modifier include male nurse, male model, male prostitute, which seem to provide a comment on the activities expected of women. Interestingly enough, male whore and male slut are a little incongruous in most dialects. Whore and slut seem to have a moral connotation which seems somehow less central in prostitute, which seems to be primarily a statement about a person's source of income. There are cases where people of unknown sex are designated by feminine pronouns. Both pronouns were illustrated in an elementary school staff notice requesting that "the supervisor will make sure each of his teachers will fill out her forms." One area where the female is used to cover the entire species is in the words for certain animals, for example, goose in spite of the presence of gander.

Asymmetries are common in syntax; for example, one says Widow Brown but not Widower Brown. Mary is John's widow is obviously well-formed, but John is Mary's widower. sounds a little strange. One can say Mrs. John Smith or Mr. and Mrs. John Smith, but not Mr. Mary Smith or Mr. and Mrs. Mary Smith. The fact that Mr. and Mrs. are not equivalent is further illustrated by their conjunction with titles like Dr. and Prof. Thus, one says Dr. and Mrs. Smith if the doctor is male, but neither Dr. and Mr. Smith nor Mr. and Dr. Smith if the doctor is female.

Verbs for sexual intercourse are irregular in their syntax. Verbs like screw and fuck are asymmetrical compared to an expression like to have intercourse with. Both He has intercourse with her. and She has intercourse with him. are grammatical but whereas He screws her and He fucks her are well-formed, She screws him and She fucks him. are less clear. Indeed, the most likely interpretation for the latter is metaphorical, where the verbs involve deception not sex. Parenthetically, that sex and deception should be semantically related is easier for women to explain than for linguists. The same process in reverse seems to be operating in expressions like to do someone and to be had. Conversely, an expression like to put out requires a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

feminine subject: He puts out. seems strange. Not native to my dialect is the verb to ball which apparently is symmetrical in its syntax, allowing both masculine and feminine subjects. Conceivable the change in language is accompanying the change in attitude, as sex stops being something men do to women and something women do for men. However, for most speakers, to ball is sexist in its lexical associations. I am usually laughed at when I suggest that it might be associated with to have a ball.

Just as there is asymmetry in syntax, so there is asymmetry in the lexicon. For example, although man and boy may correspond to woman and girl, there is, at least in my dialect, no equivalent for guy. The words for males seem to provide for a general ageless category not available for females. Conversely, male Mr. corresponds to both Mrs. and Miss; here the words for females are over-differentiated. It is worth observing that both under-differentiation and over-differentiation are merely opposite sides of the same sexist coin. Guy is neutral as to age; Mr. is neutral as to marital state. Elsewhere in the vocabulary there are references to women with no male equivalent; consider for example, a word like nymphomaniac; in my dialect there is no parallel to divorcée; there is housewife but no househusband, and expressions like old wives' tale, but no old husbands' tale. Quite apart from what one thinks of the institution, it is revealing that the activity is referred to as wife-swapping, not husband-swapping.

Certain lexical fields have developed a proliferation of metaphorical terms, euphemisms and epithets. One such area is the words for women themselves. For example, they are referred to with words for food. Although sugar and honey are used to refer to both men and women, only a woman is normally referred to as a dish or a tomato. The word peach, incidentally, has become generalized so that it occurs in expressions like a peach of a day, a peach of a movie, etc.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Animal names are used metaphorically to refer to humans, and it is simplistic to claim that all such metaphors are offensive. A reference to a brave person as lion-hearted is surely not derrogatory. But chick, bunny, pussycat presumably refer to a soft, cuddly, pet-like quality, quail is something that one hunts, and I don't know what the use of barracuda is supposed to mean. An explicitly sexual and sexist perception of women is illustrated by the fact that they and not men can be referred to as a piece, piece of ass, piece of tail. The word lady is more complex, involving distinctions of class as well as sex.

Exclusively female activities like pregnancy and menstruation have numerous euphemisms as well as epithets, to be expecting alongside of to be knocked up, to be unwell alongside of to have the rag on. On the other hand, activities like masturbation and intercourse are referred to as though they were exclusively male. Expressions like to jerk off invariably imply a penis or an ejaculation. The words for intercourse seem to combine elements of violence and contempt with eroticism. Football players anticipating sex report going home to punish the old lady and one novelist writing about a particular sub-culture uses the expression to do the job on someone both for sex and murder. Both the syntax of these words as well as their connotations suggest that sex is primarily a male-oriented activity. One cannot, for example, talk about a woman plowing a man. Not surprisingly, the euphemisms for sex, like to sleep with someone and to go to bed with someone are syntactically symmetrical.

That sex and violence are related is illustrated further by references to the penis with terms for tools or weapons. A sterile man, for example, is said to be shooting blanks. In contrast, one of the striking things about words for women's sexual organs is the absence of words for clitoris on the one hand and the proliferation of words for breasts on the other.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The unique perception of male sexuality is illustrated by current "hip" expressions like to get off with the meaning 'to enjoy' or to get it up for something with the meaning 'to be enthusiastic,' which presumably are semantic extensions of terms originally referring to male orgasm and to erection. And what can one make of the fact that fundamental ideas are referred to as seminal?

Certain areas of the vocabulary show similarity in form, but quite different meanings. A governor governs a state, but a governess governs children. A mistress is not a female mister. Similarly a majorette is not a woman major, nor is a starlet a woman star. In fact a starlet is not a star at all. A laundryman is usually someone who drives a truck and works for an established firm. A laundrywoman works for herself and delivers laundry in a basket. Some words apply to both men and women, but with different meanings. He is a tramp. is a statement about finances; She is a tramp. is about morals. In Spanish El es inocente. means 'He is innocent.' but Ella es inocente. has the additional meaning 'She is a virgin.'

Linguistic usage, what is sometimes referred to as pragmatics as opposed to syntax and semantics, is an area where language and attitudes interact by definition. Thus, for example, words like promiscuous, or tease in the sexual sense, are normally used to apply to women. Verbs like titter, chatter, cackle usually refer to women and/or children. The word co-ed is used differently in The school is co-ed. and The school has co-eds. Conversely, although words like lawyer and doctor are linguistically just as neutral as friend or cousin. they are perceived as referring to males, so that a group may be referred to as lawyers and their wives, and a caption in a history book can refer to pioneers and their wives. Similarly, a reference to a last name only is perceived as referring to a male. A colleague reports writing an article with references to Scott, Thackeray and Austen, all of which were edited to read Scott, Thackeray and Jane Austen.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Sexuality is the basis of interpretation of a word like couple, which is understood to be heterosexual, whereas a word like cocksucker is understood to be homosexual. It is surely not accidental that of the two, only the latter is used as an insult.

Finally, there are areas of the vocabulary which seem to be equivalent, but are ultimately asymmetrical. Thus, one hears He bitches. and She bitches. with the meaning 'complain,' and He is an old maid. alongside She is an old maid. but the former member of each pair is to be understood as applying to men an undesirable quality usually associated with women. Conversely, a recent magazine article referred to Germaine Greer as a ballsy feminist. Thus, when men are cranky, they are behaving like women; when women are courageous, they are behaving like men. In this connection, to refer to, say, a difficult exam, as a ball-buster must be of limited significance to a woman. Bachelor and spinster are far from equivalent. One can talk of an attractive bachelor, but hardly of an attractive spinster. Bachelor father is a common expression usually referring, incidentally, to a divorced father, but bachelor mother is rare, and spinster mother is incongruous. The verbs to father and to mother have different meanings: to father a child is to be the biological father; to mother a child is to protect, perhaps over-protect it. Even bride and groom are not equivalent. One talks about his bride, but not of her groom. Indeed, a woman remains a bride for some undefined time, but a man stops being a groom the day after the wedding. Something about the relationship is reflected in the inclusion in the ceremony of the statement You may kiss the bride. and not You may kiss the groom.

Probably the two most emotionally charged words in English are cunt and prick, particularly when applied to people. Again the use of a word for a part to refer to the whole person is not automatically objectionable. To refer to a compassionate

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

person as being all heart or to an intelligent person as a brain seems anything but pejorative. However, in the case of the epithet for male genitals, the word seems to have little sexual connotation, often being merely a comment on the man's intelligence, whereas, in the case of women, the reverse is the case; cunt seems to imply a judgment about sexuality and morality.

One last, well-publicized example may illustrate how additional meanings are assigned expressions when they are applied to women. Consider the airline compay slogan We really move our tail for you. For men, the slogan is two-ways ambiguous, referring either to the tail of the plane, or to the figurative meaning 'to work hard. For women, the slogan is three-ways ambiguous, where the additional reading is the one where move is to be interpreted literally. The preoccupation with this part of women's bodies is not unique; in Seattle, a new women's clothing store is called Bottom's; the sign announcing the opening read, Now, girls have Bottom's.

I have provided relatively little in the way of explanation, and, I have even less to say about the political and social implications, and the alternative strategies they suggest for change. Clearly, the examples are far from exhaustive, and they represent a wide range, not only in terms of the particular aspect of linguistic structure, but also in the extent to which the facts are at the level of awareness and hance acknowledged by the average speaker. The more institutionalized a particular phenomenon becomes, the less visible, and, presumably, the more resistant it is to change. Thus, one might question the effectiveness of a suggestion that we eliminate the word seminar because it shares the stem of the word semen, and undoubtedly was sexist in its origin.

Given the data, then, one can ask, is language sexist or are people sexist or is society sexist? The probable answer, regrettably, is all three.*

Sol Saporta
U. of Washington
Seattle, Washington

*A paper (to be) delivered at the December 1974 meeting in New York of the Modern Language Association